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RHHMUNA/USPACOM HONOLULU HI//FPA//

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000846

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS, EAP/EP/ EEB/IFD/OMA

STATE PASS EXIM, OPIC, AND USTR

STATE PASS USAID FOR AA/ANE, AA/EGAT, DAA/ANE

TREASURY FOR OASIA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: FWWT ECON RP SO XW XE

SUBJECT: Filipinos Held by Somali Pirates

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Filipinos account for about one-third of the world's one million commercial seafarers and for over 100 of the approximately 300 seafarers currently held captive by Somali pirates. Since the U.S. Navy action against pirates, the Philippine government has come under increasing pressure to act to free the captives. It has responded with precautionary guidelines for ships and with strong support to enforcing related UN Security Council resolutions. The Philippines has also expressed interest in liaising with the U.S.-led anti-piracy effort. On April 21, Somali pirates released 23 Filipinos after a negotiating team composed of company officials and foreign consultants met the pirates' demands. End Summary.

The Importance of Overseas Filipino Workers

¶12. (U) The welfare of "Overseas Filipino Workers," including seafarers, is important to the Philippine government and public. According to the Philippine central bank, more than 350,000 Filipino seafarers remitted over \$3 billion back to the Philippines in 2008. In the first two months of this year, they remitted almost \$500 million. Altogether, Overseas Filipino Workers provide over 10% of Philippine GDP, for which they are praised as national heroes. The Philippine government facilitates the overseas deployment of its nationals and monitors their welfare. In 2004, in order to protect a single Overseas Filipino Worker who was being held hostage, the Philippines banned all Filipinos from working in Iraq. Since then, Philippine passports have been stamped "not valid for travel to Iraq" and the ban has been fairly effectively implemented.

Naval Envy

¶13. (U) According to Philippine officials, since 2006 at least 227 Filipino sailors on non-Filipino vessels have been taken hostage by pirates in waters off the Somali coast. Most of these hostages have been released after the payment of ransom by the shipping lines. However, over 100 Filipino merchant sailors are still being held by pirates on seven vessels. Some have been held for months and have no clear prospect of release. The limited ability of the Philippine government to help these hostages was highlighted in contrast to recent U.S. Navy actions to assist U.S. sailors attacked by Somali pirates. On April 19, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines called on the government to spare no effort to safely recover all of the hostages without further delay. This call for government action has been echoed by Filipino merchant sailors and the families of the hostages, and has resonated in local media.

¶14. (U) The Philippine government responded by issuing guidelines to

its manning agencies (which supply seafarers) and shipping lines advising ships carrying Filipino seafarers to remain at least 300 kilometers offshore, travel in convoys, and follow the other precautions recommended by the International Maritime Organization. The Philippine government also stated it will give its full support to enforcing related UN Security Council Resolutions.

Filipino Sailors on Every Vessel

¶ 15. (U) In addition, Philippine government officials have publicly floated the idea of banning Filipino sailors from merchant ships plying the Gulf of Aden. The head of one seafarers union ridiculed such a ban as impossible to implement, since most merchant marine vessels have Filipino sailors on board and no ship owner could disembark its Filipino crew before the ship enters the Gulf of Aden, and then replace them once past Somali waters. He added that such a ban could prevent shipping lines from legally hiring Filipinos for vessels on major shipping routes between Europe and East Asia, which not only would cause additional expenses for global shipping, but would also cost the jobs of many thousands of Filipinos seafarers.

¶ 16. (U) We have confirmed April 21 wire reports that Somali pirates released 23 Filipino seafarers after a negotiating team composed of company officials and foreign consultants was able to meet the pirates' demands. However, the company officials we spoke with refused to confirm that they paid a ransom. We have also confirmed that the Philippines is interested in liaising with the U.S.-led anti-piracy effort and is now exploring its options.

Comment

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¶ 17. (SBU) It is not yet clear whether the Philippine government will attempt to ban its merchant sailors from ships plying the waters off Somalia. However, it is clear that pressure on the government is mounting to take action to address the festering problems of its nationals being held hostage by pirates. Philippine officials have told us that interagency discussions on seafarers in the Gulf of Aden are underway.

Kenney